

WASHINGTON, D.C. – Representatives Jim Costa (D-Fresno) and Dennis Cardoza (D-Merced) introduced a bill today that would help ease the effects of severe drought in the Central Valley by facilitating the transfers of up to 300,000 acre-feet of irrigation water.

The Water Transfer Facilitation Act of 2009 eases restrictions on the Bureau of Reclamation and would streamline environmental reviews for the giant garter snake. The bill would reduce unnecessary delays in water transfers at a time when Central Valley farmers have been hard hit by a three-year drought. Congressman Costa introduced the bill and Congressman Cardoza was the original cosponsor. Senators Dianne Feinstein and Barbara Boxer were expected to introduce similar legislation in the U.S. Senate today.

A similar provision to temporarily authorize water transfers was included in the conference report for the Fiscal Year 2010 Energy & Water appropriations bill. The conference report was adopted by the House last week and will likely be adopted by the Senate this week. Today's legislation would make the transfer facilitation permanent.

"Transferring water between and within counties for water districts is a critical tool to use during periods of drought," Representative Costa said. "While the best solution would be to have the federal and state pumps fully operational, because we have been unable to modify the Endangered Species Act, this change in the law provides us some relief. This legislation makes permanent the ability to transfer water to our Valley's farms when it is most needed, therefore, allowing our farmers a lifeline to continue to grow crops and help our local economy. More will need to be done to protect the Valley's water, and I will continue that fight."

"I have worked with my colleagues on both sides of the aisle for years to include common-sense reforms in the Endangered Species Act. Working on a bipartisan basis, we have tried to get the pumps permanently 'turned on' and ensure our Valley farmers have the water they so desperately need to feed our nation. Because it has become abundantly clear this strategy is not working, common sense dictates we need to pursue other workable options like this legislation, which is a significant step forward in providing relief to our growers. As we continue to move ahead, I will pursue every possible, and practical, means of getting water to our growers," said Representative Cardoza .

Specifically, the measure would:

- Establish new parameters for San Joaquin Valley water transfers that can be authorized by the Bureau of Reclamation. Previously, the Bureau of Reclamation would not approve water transfers if it was determined that the seller with surplus water could have used the water (i.e., for irrigation or groundwater storage purposes), even if the transfer was proven to have no negative impact on the environment. The legislation introduced today would explicitly grant the Bureau the authority to approve these types of East-West transfers, as long as they meet other minimum environmental regulations. The Bureau of Reclamation estimates that this provision could yield up to 100,000 acre-feet of water transfers per year.

- Direct the Interior Department to streamline the giant garter snake environmental review for water transfers from the Sacramento Valley to the San Joaquin Valley by ensuring that they occur on a programmatic basis rather than on a project-by-project basis. This would allow the Bureau of Reclamation to approve North-South water transfers more promptly and ensure that the endangered giant garter snake is sufficiently protected. The Bureau of Reclamation estimates that this provision could yield up to 200,000 acre-feet of water transfers per year.

- Direct the Bureau of Reclamation to analyze existing transfers and prepare recommendations on whether there are other ways to facilitate future Central Valley transfers more efficiently. This would include transfers from California state and federal water projects. The legislation is supported by the following water agencies and associations:

- Friant Water Users Authority
- Delta-Mendota Canal Authority
- Glen Colusa Irrigation District
- Banta-Carbona Irrigation District

- San Joaquin River Exchange Contractors Authority
- San Luis Water District
- Association of California Water Agencies
- Northern California Water Association
- Tehama-Colusa Canal Authority
- Westlands Water District
- Metropolitan Water District
- Placer County Water Agency
- Conaway Preservation Group
- Reclamation District 2035